

Pentecost 15 – 24 August 2008 – The Rev. Dr. Guy J.D. Collins

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

One of the special things about the Episcopal church is that we take culture seriously. And I don't mean by this that we like going to the opera or reading stimulating books, although that may well also be the case. What I really mean is that historically speaking Anglicanism has spent a great deal of time and effort taking culture theologically seriously. In contrast to traditions that emphasise the scriptures or a particular tradition, we are also keen to emphasize the role of different cultures in shaping our faith. One important sign of this theology of culture can be seen in the willingness to adopt principles of democracy in our church governance. In contrast to the authorities we heard about in the first reading and Gospel reading, the Episcopal church is not governed by a singular authority. Instead we take seriously the diversity of the Christic body that Paul talks about in his letter to the Romans.

Although you will struggle to find mention of the principles of democratic governance in the scriptures, there are hints that authority is not as centralized as the story of Peter the rock might suggest. For instance, the replacement for Judas is chosen ultimately by lot rather than being appointed. At the same time, a great many of these hints are in the form of negative evidence. A close reading of the scriptures suggests that the wisdom of a centralized authority is rarely an undisputed good. Quite the reverse. Many of the most heinous and egregious calamities recorded by the scriptures are the result of authoritarian rulers. From the Pharaoh in our first reading ordering the genocide of baby boys, to the many other malevolent rulers in the scriptures, authority is often synonymous with exploitation rather than nurture and care. Or as the saying has it, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Now that we are some weeks away from the Lambeth Conference it seems that one of the big divides within our Anglican Communion is precisely this question of authority. The genius of Anglicanism has been to allow people to hold divergent beliefs while all singing the same hymns and saying the same prayers. But in the wake of Lambeth we now have to face the uncomfortable possibility of a drift towards the centralization of authority in our global communion.

When the rest of the world is discovering the benefits of local governance and devolution it seems profoundly ironic that Anglicans might even be considering a structure to provide more centralised authority. And to be quite honest with you, that single issue more than any other, is likely to decide the fate of the Anglican Communion. Unhappy as many people are with the status quo, a more centralized Communion will make a nonsense of the last couple of hundred years of post-colonial and multi-cultural experiences. As Anglicanism has gone beyond the English speaking world, and as it has spread beyond the bounds of the British Empire we have learned a lot more about the nature of church. We have learned to see our church no longer as identified with one nation or one culture. And instead we have begun to enjoy the fruits of different voices and different approaches to the God who is the source of all life.

If we take seriously Paul's words about the diversity of the body, then it seems to me that we need to work hard to invite those whose bodies are different into our churches. Wherever we find ourselves in current global debates about the future of Anglicanism, all of us have our share of work to do in making the body of Christ truly diverse. And this is not because it is the latest thinking to come out of some political think-tank or cultural studies curriculum. This diversity is incumbent upon us because we believe that all ways of life and all human experience are ultimately rooted in a God who created diversity.

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As those who attend church in a lovely part of the world, it is our duty to create a new resistance movement. Like the French resistance who fought against the evils of a totalitarian regime that sought complete unity of purpose and ethnic purity, so we have to resist the siren calls of uniformity. And this is something that each of us can do as we think globally but act locally. If the church is to be more diverse, then each of us must do all in our power to make this church of St Thomas more diverse and less uniform by reaching out to invite in those who are not the same as us.

As a church that takes culture seriously there is always the danger of completely conforming to the culture around us. But when it comes to reflecting the diversity in economic status, national background and educational experience the Episcopal church has typically lagged far behind the areas it finds itself in. Here in the Upper Valley we are no exception to that rule.

One of the reasons Jesus asks his disciples to say who he is, is surely related to this. Each disciple will give a different answer. Just as each churchgoer will bring a different perspective. As a church if we are to really worship, love, serve and grow, we need to be a place where differences are encouraged and honored. And this means each one of us going out of our way to welcome others into the body that is the church.

We have two very powerful metaphors for the church in our readings this morning. We have the metaphor of a rock: a solid, unchanging, reliable and longlasting metaphor. The pace of change for rocks can be measured geologically into millions of years, and so it is a suitable image for those who wish their churches to be constant and model the eternal changelessness of God. By contrast, our other metaphor for the church, that of the body, is a radically ephemeral, vulnerable, ever-changing and ever-developing metaphor. Bodies unlike rocks are weak,

and their boundaries are being constantly reimagined and constantly traversed one way or another.

Its striking to me that during Communion we don't talk much about the rock of Christ. Although, technically at least, the church is the rock. Instead we talk about the body of Christ. And through our bodies we are created into the Christian body in the sharing of wine and bread.

The question for all of us as we leave this place after making our Communion is whether we want to be part of a church that is a rock, or part of a church that is a body. Too often Christianity has been petrified of being the body, literally frozen into patterns of practice and belief that are as ancient and as relevant as some geological substrata. But if we are really to be the church we need to reclaim the vulnerability of both our bodies and the bodies of others. Which means opening ourselves up to those who are different, and sharing all that is most precious with not just the loveable but also the loveless. For only by finding Christ in the diverse bodies of others are we really part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. But if we can welcome the stranger and embrace those who are not remotely like us, then we will find Christ and renew Christ's own body. Amen.